

## Plant Exchange

## Want To Grow The Plants You Eat?

BY BRENDA K. JOHNSON

P&amp;D Correspondent

Experienced gardener Beth Preheim of Yankton is vested in the spirit of Yankton community gardens. She has adapted to the growing site she rents each year since the gardens opened. She grows just enough fresh produce in the extended growing season for her family needs, for others and produce in the freezer. Weather, ground squirrels, rabbits, harmful fungi and insects don't dissuade her. See what she has to say from her last season small space gardening that may apply wherever you garden.

## WHAT DO YOU NEED FOR GROWING VEGETABLES?

"Gardening friends are as important as having the gardening skills to grow something. We swap a lot back and forth," Beth Preheim of Yankton said. Garden friends trade information on what works better. Because she tries to plant no more than for her needs, sometimes having a friend who has extra zucchini comes in handy when her two plants die overnight from wilt.

"That's great about sharing at the community gardens," she said. Although she's now been gardening 25 years, she tried growing tomatillos for the first time three years ago. Tomatillos are a tomato-like fruit found in Mexican cuisine.

"Blooms but empty shells," she said. "I didn't realize you have to have two plants in order to get fruit. They don't pollinate themselves." Another gardener gave her the heads up and her two plants had fruit.

## ONE EYE ON WEATHER, ONE ON MICROCLIMATE, ONE ON PESTS

Last season, her two garden plots were at the garden entrance. Gardeners stopped and chatted on their way to their plots. They talked about varieties of beans that grow well at the gardens. This area of the gardens is prone to flooding in heavy rain.

"I mound raised beds (of soil without border enclosures) for the plants because this area flash floods. It can be very discouraging to garden in the Dakotas," she said. "I'm adapting to my site. I've had my failures." She refers to wilt and a lost zucchini crop.

She started planting the day the community gardens opened last season in mid April. By late May, young transplants of spinach she had started at home were ready for harvest. Radishes too. Next came harvest of several other greens. Beans, squash, onions, cucumbers, tomatoes, various peppers, eggplant, beets, potatoes, okra, carrots and tomatillos followed, all in two garden plots.

"We plant throughout the season and try to harvest throughout the season. My goal is to keep the crop small," she said. For her small family needs of mostly fresh produce, this works well.

Preheim chooses simple ways to improve growing conditions for her plants. The plots are in full sun and have wind exposure that bolts lettuce and turns it bitter soon into the sea-



PHOTO: BRENDA K. JOHNSON

**Beth Preheim liked the challenge of growing tomatillos for Mexican dishes. She found that having two plants for cross — pollination helped ensure the husks would fill.**

son. Light row cover and clips hold the cover on hoops that fit over the three-foot square bed. She adjusts the cover to completely protect the beds or cover only one side for the hot west sun. Cover also extends the season in spring and fall, holding warmth around the plants. Covers also deter some pests.

"Insects are held back in cool weather," she said. "Two main insect pests we have here are cabbage loopers and squash bugs. For the loopers or squash bugs I might put the cover over plants after removing them. I look for the eggs on undersides of leaves and remove them. I give plants a quick brushing so I don't have to put chemicals on them."

She has a delay strategy for some pests. "Ground squirrels and rabbits are damaging to carrots and beets. Since many plant them here, I make sure I'm not the first crop in," she said.

Some community garden neighbors use barriers to block four legged critters. Preheim has noticed that succession planting each week well into the season means that some insect damage lessened for some of the crop. Or she just delays planting a bit to avoid harmful insects.

Some soil fungus is harmful to plants like tomatoes and beans. That's a benefit of crop rotation each year.

"Here at the community gardens you have a lot of (harmful) fungus in the soil," she said. "Of course it's hard to rotate. I've become proactive about this." Whether it's a wet season or not, she clips the bottom leaves from tomato plants. This makes for better air circulation among plants. She plants the vines in two long curving rows to add more space and air circulation. She cages her plants to make sure leaves stay off the ground.

As for weeds, Preheim positions vegetable plants for a canopy of leaves that block weed growth. She also applies grass clippings to conserve moisture and block weed growth.

## HOW MUCH, WHERE AND WHEN

"My first year of gardening I asked my grandmother to help me because

she had gardened. We planted all in one day, cool and warm season plants in long rows. I had a long row of lettuce and a long row of zucchini. I had twenty zucchini plants, not two like now." With abundant results she served Zucchini Parmesan for her wedding guests.

"We have something to harvest almost the whole season," Preheim said. Gardeners appreciate produce rewards. Because she wants a little fresh produce through much of the season, she succession planted beans each week for six weeks. Young beans are ready to harvest almost until the community gardens' fall closure.

"I do pull plants when I have too many," she said.

Some gardeners have experienced radish exuberance after early spring over-planting. Preheim plants a third of her crop each of three weeks beginning early May and then waits until August to consider a fall crop. She stores them in the refrigerator between crops.

"It took me years to get the right amount of plants," she said. She records the variety, yield in her garden and comments if needed each year. "I want just enough in case of a little crop failure or to replant."

She took over a plot in late June one year and discovered planting that late could give good results. Now she plants a couple of short rows of Provider green beans weekly in May. This allows her fresh beans in early July through the summer.

Because she plants a very few of many varieties in her garden, she benefits from the way each variety handles conditions differently. Last year she had 12 varieties of tomatoes and 14 plants!

She trades with others and saves open seed packages year to year. She has favorite varieties that are early bearing, some are slicers, some are paste for sauce and some for other uses. She grows "tried and true" hybrids, heirlooms and tries new ones.

Transplants were in the ground before the end of May last year. She grows a couple of tomatoes at home, one in a container. She starts most of her tomatoes from seed and transplants at about four weeks. She said that starting the garden young tomato plants has

advantages for her and plants seem to catch up well. She places them in trenches for protection. Many were blooming by late June last season.

"Someone heard about what we do with our community garden plots and donated 70 tomato plants. We have more tomato plants than usual," she said. She shared plants with others and will give some produce to others.

She plants cole crops such as cabbage and kale in early April. She plants warm-season direct seeds such as cucumber, squash, and zucchini in late May.

Most of her plot is laid out in three-foot blocks so that plants are in beds rather than rows. She refers to last year's notes for rotating beds each season. This is a challenge in small garden plots. She spaces plants far enough apart to hand cultivate around the plants but depends on the plant leaf to help shade soil and block weed growth.

She positions tall okra plants on the west side of the garden to block the hot sun when they are mature. With okra, she companion plants cucumbers. They may climb the okra and are shaded by its leaves. Cucumber vines are ground covers that conserve moisture for the okra plant roots.

Names of varieties that grow well are one of the many bits of shared information among the community gardeners. While Preheim had experienced growing conditions at her present site, she also heard suggestions from other gardeners. She records names of varieties she grows that produce well and the name of her source. See Preheim's chart of best varieties for her garden.

## ANOTHER REASON PREHEIM GARDENS

"I grow as much eggplant as I do for demonstrations. At work, I gave away 70 transplants (that she grew from seed at home)."

Preheim is a nurse and conducts patient education clinics for diabetes, lowering cholesterol, weight loss and heart procedure recovery rehab services at Freeman Regional Health Services. She looks at lifestyle changes and has been in public health about 25 years.

"If you aren't eating many fruits and vegetables, and you add them, you can see a difference. Not everyone has the same metabolic pathway," she said.

She tried the idea herself one summer. Cholesterol patterns naturally change over a year.

"I checked my cholesterol (results) and what I ate for two months. I think the combination of eating eggplant, okra and tomatillo helped me," she said.

"Once we figured out how to use eggplant, we have grown more," she said. "I chop it with peppers and put it on a tortilla with cheese. That takes ten minutes for my evening snack." If she roasts the eggplant and removes skin and seeds, she then purees it. She prepares eggplant dip or adds it to soup or rice.

"We freeze pureed eggplant and eat it year round," she said.

"I like plants," Preheim said. "I like growing my own food. It helps with the budget. Then I work professionally to help people figure out lifestyle changes."

## Eggplant Recipes

Beth Preheim of Yankton knew nutritional benefits of eggplant but didn't grow them often until she found recipes that she and her husband liked. Now some recipe books feature homegrown vegetables.

## Chef Staci Stengle's

## Moroccan Eggplant Soup

## INGREDIENTS

- 1 large eggplant chopped in 1-inch cubes
- Up to 6 garlic cloves chopped
- 1 medium onion chopped
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 roasted red bell pepper, thinly sliced
- Spice Mix: 2 teaspoons cumin (or cumin seeds toasted and crushed) and 2 teaspoons toasted and crushed fennel seeds
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 6 cups of soup stock
- 1 cup basmati or brown rice

## DIRECTIONS

1. Saute onion and garlic in olive oil for 5 minutes.
2. Add spice mix and cook for 2 minutes
3. Add eggplant and red bell pepper and cook for 3 minutes.
4. Add 6 cups chicken stock and rice.
5. Bring to a boil then simmer until the rice is done.
6. Optional: Puree half the soup and return to the pot.
7. Optional: Serve with plain yogurt and / or cilantro.

## Chef Staci Stengle's

## Baba Ghannouj Dip

## INGREDIENTS

- 1 large eggplant (can use frozen roasted Eggplant)
- 1 - 2 garlic cloves
- 1/4 cup plain yoghurt
- 1/4 cup tahini (or 1/4 cup ground sesame seeds) or substitute olive oil or nuts
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- Juice of 1/3 of a lemon or 1-2 tablespoons lemon juice
- Salt and pepper to taste

## DIRECTIONS

1. Roast eggplant: Cover eggplant in olive oil, wrap loosely in foil or put in a roaster, bake at 425 degrees F until soft, and turn every 5-10 minutes.
2. Peel eggplant and remove seeds.
3. Put all the ingredients in a food processor and blend until smooth.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

This Week's Hometown Section will be in the Saturday Edition of the *Press and Dakotan*.

Share tips from your outdoor or indoor plant experience, give us a tour of your plant site, or tell us what you enjoy most about these plants and people who grow them. Contact [news@yankton.net](mailto:news@yankton.net) Attn: Brenda Johnson or write P&D, 319 Walnut St, Yankton, SD 57078, Attn: Brenda Johnson. Blog [www.brendakjohnsonplantexchange.wordpress.com](http://www.brendakjohnsonplantexchange.wordpress.com)

## March Plant Tips

Korey Mensch is an owner and grower at the commercial greenhouse in Avon. Thanks to Mensch for his down-home tips as spring approaches.

"When the days start getting longer and spring is approaching I always hear 'Can't wait to get out there.' What is stopping you?" Mensch said.

• While the ground is still frozen, it's time to start that cleanup session. Get out to your beds and gardens and get all that debris off to expose that soil so it can start to warm and thaw.

• When thawed out, don't waste any time, get the ground worked up. Expose the weed seeds that have blown into some good conditions and get a lot of them to germinate. Work the soils several times with 10-14 days in between to make weeding during the summer months a much easier job.

• After getting worked several times, your soil should be fluffed and ready to plant, but still don't bother to rush. You should always plant early if you want to plant twice. Springs around here are so unpredictable, that there is no definite date to set yourself for starting. When the long range forecast starts to eliminate frost, it is time to plant only the hardier crops like broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, kale, radish and on. Planting should be spread out for the more sensitive crops. For example, sweet potatoes shouldn't be planted until the ground is downright hot and the nights are staying warm.

• When planning your planting, don't be afraid to try something new, whether it's a new variety of tomato or flowering perennial. New is usually good. New varieties are usually developed with a purpose, be it disease resistance, habit, yield or flower power. The same variety that your grandparents swore by might not be the best option anymore, even if it is available.

Sometimes the right choice is obvious

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